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THE STUDY OF FOLK-LORE.¹

THE term "folk-lore" seems to many persons to cover a field of study not clearly defined; but this quality of indefiniteness is common to all terms used to denote studies connected with the intelligence of man. "Anthropology," "ethnology," "psychology," are each terms embracing a vague and infinitely extended field, which, in practice, is limited by more or less arbitrary boundaries.

By "folk-lore" is to be understood oral tradition,—information and belief handed down from generation to generation without the use of writing. There are reasons why the mass of knowledge (including history, theology, and romance) which has been orally preserved in any people should be set aside as capable of independent treatment. Such matter must express the common opinion, or it would not be remembered; it must be on a level with the notions of the average rather than of the exceptional person; it must belong, that is, to the *folk* rather than to individuals.

The term "folk-lore" has its most definite significance in connection with civilized peoples of modern Europe, having been invented by an anonymous correspondent of the London *Athenæum* (Aug. 22, 1846), who signed his name Ambrose Merton, understood to be a pseudonyme for W. J. Thoms. He included under this title "manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads,

proverbs," and claimed the honor of introducing into the language the word "fo'k lore," as Disraeli had claimed the honor of "fatherland." The latter word has not met with success; but "folk-lore" has been accepted not only in English speech, but also in most European languages.

It was soon evident that the oral traditions of Europe could not be treated by themselves without consideration of oral traditions in other parts of the globe. Customs and superstitions found in the United States, for example, not only among recent immigrants, but also in families of the purest English stock, have evident connection with practices and beliefs widely extended among savage tribes. It was therefore necessary to extend the term "folk-lore" so as to cover these. There was some protest against these, inasmuch as the name "folk" belongs properly to races in which isolated tribes have been amalgamated into something resembling a nation; but this difficulty could not be allowed to prevent a convenient inclusion. So the expression came to be used, first in a definite sense, as including tales, beliefs, and practices now retained among the unlettered peasantry of Europe; second, with a wider connotation, as embracing traditionary tales, customs, and usages of uncivilized races. In its broader meaning, therefore, folk-lore is a part of anthropology and ethnography, embracing the mental side of primitive life, with especial reference to the narratives in which beliefs and habits are related or accounted for.

The subject has two sides,—the æsthetic or literary aspect, and the scientific aspect. Remarks were made on folk-lore from each of these points of view.

In treating of the literary side of folk-lore, the lecturer took his illustration from English ballads. The character of the ballad as a dance-song (late Latin *ballare*, "to dance") was pointed out, and it was shown that dancing in couples, as a mere mode of motion, was comparatively modern. According to more ancient usage, a dance was a dramatic performance, setting forth a story, which was related in a song serving to guide the movement. An illustration of this custom was still to be seen in the "ring-games" of children. The date of collection of English ballads, and the periods of their composition, formed the theme of observations. It was shown that the circumstance of the late recording of many ancient ballads in Scotland had led to the erroneous supposition that Scotland had possessed a distinctively national song, unlike that of England; the fact being that so-called Scottish ballads were only dialectic survivals of songs formerly common to all parts of Great Britain. For the origin of these compositions it is necessary to look beyond the limits of English speech; mediæval ballads not being the property of any one European country, but in a measure a common stock.

The qualities which rendered these songs of interest were remarked on, and popularity, simplicity, and antiquity were named as constituting the charm of the ballad. What has been repeated for centuries, has passed from lip to lip, and formed the joy of all classes, must stand on a different level from sentences penned for a chosen few. Ballads show that there was a period in which the mediæval noble and the mediæval serf stood nearly on the same intellectual level. These compositions serve as a perpetual lesson of simplicity, and will always be of value to bring literature back to that character of naturalness and simplicity in which true art must consist.

Proceeding to treat of the scientific side of the study, an example of a surviving American superstition was cited in the practice still in use in certain parts of the country to charm rats away from houses by writing letters to them. A specimen of such a letter was read, for the accuracy of which the lecturer could vouch, the district being the seacoast of Maine. It was shown that this method of ridding a house of rats was also occasionally used in Maryland. Comparisons from Scottish folk-lore showed that the superstition was spread throughout the English-speaking world. The custom was also shown to prevail widely in France, and its origin traced to the mediæval practice of addressing legal citations and ecclesiastical admonitions to animals.

Following out the subject into the belief of savage tribes, the underlying principle was shown to be a doctrine respecting the identity of animal and human existence. In uncivilized races,

¹ Abstract of an address to the New York Academy of Sciences, March 24, 1890, by William Wells Newell, secretary of the American Folk-Lore Society.